

Green Party response to consultation on closure of Walton Street at the junction with Worcester Street North and Beaumont Street.

1. Oxford Green Party supports the permanent closure of the south end of Walton Street to motor vehicles for the reasons set out below.
2. However we suggest that the position of the barrier may need to be reviewed, provided measures are introduced generally to restrict traffic and improve the area, and depending on the effect of the proposed Worcester Street filter. In particular we would support the creation of a carefully planned Low Traffic Neighbourhood, ideas for which are already being put forward by residents.
3. Between the junction in question (Worcester St/Beaumont St/ Walton St) and the nearest road running into Jericho (Little Clarendon St) Walton Street south is a largely residential stretch, which for years was troubled by noise and air pollution from cars, often queuing to get onto the congested Worcester St/ Beaumont St junction. Residents of this end of Walton Street are mixed, and comprise families with children, retired people and students. On the east side of the south end of Walton St, housing fronts straight onto the pavement all the way to the junction, meaning that air pollution and traffic noise affected homes for many years. This part of Walton St is at the south end of Jericho, a reasonably densely populated area where a high number of residents walk or cycle and do not have cars. Further along Walton St (northwards) are many shops, OUP which is a local employer, The Observatory Quarter which includes a local medical practice with two surgeries, a cinema, and several cafes, restaurants, pubs and takeaways, hairdressers, a bicycle repair shop, and further private residences. Just off the street is a primary school. The area of Jericho is mixed, and is mainly residential with a large church in addition to the school and several pubs which serve food.
4. Connecting Oxford proposes a traffic filter on Worcester Street which will prevent private motorised vehicles from accessing Walton St via the south end junction anyway. Connecting Oxford consultation brought forth an unexpectedly high number of responses from Oxford residents, saying not only are the solutions proposed welcome, but they do not go far enough.
5. Cycling and walking in this localised area has risen, with children able to play outside in this piece of recently freed-up public space. All policy documents have for many years underlined a commitment to healthy living, including safe roads to cycle on, convenient walking routes, and places for children to safely play out of doors. Pavements in this area are narrow, and the experience of walking and cycling on this stretch of Walton Street has undoubtedly been far more safe and pleasant since the closure of the road. Air quality has been improved for residents, and the street has a peaceful quality it had not enjoyed for decades. Wheelchair users have found it easier to use the road than the narrow, sometimes bumpy, pavements.
6. The issue of 'rat-running' along eg. St Bernard's Road is a serious one, as Jericho is essentially a large cul-de-sac, with limited routes into and out. Some drivers have complained that they now need to drive further and for longer to access local businesses and homes. This issue requires further study to discover where drivers are going and for what reasons. It would be helpful if a survey could be carried out by businesses, asking customers to note how they travelled to their establishment and from where.

7. Further study and the need for effective action may well suggest the creation of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood, especially in view of large lorries using the narrow streets in this area. Ideas for this are already being developed by residents. It would help to have a regular bus service between the City Centre and the JR hospital/Headington, stopping in Jericho at the very least once per hour. People who are driving may well find this more convenient than taking the car if their journeys are essential. From the city centre buses go elsewhere, as they do from Headington.
8. Traders are usually the first to worry when private motorised traffic is limited in movement, fearing for their livelihoods. In cities where pedestrianised areas are created traders have protested the street closures, and felt vindicated when trade has dipped. However this dip is followed by increased trading if the area has improved in quality for people on foot. The Pedestrian Pound, as walkers' spending is dubbed, has been shown to rise by up to 30% on streets with little or no traffic. A local publican gave his view, which is that if anything his trade had gone up since closure, probably because his pub had no carpark, parking on-street is restricted, and the street may have been felt as a more pleasant place to walk, cycle, and indeed to sit alongside. He commented that the local retail and hospitality premises have no dedicated customer parking, which implies that businesses may not be heavily reliant on customers arriving by car.
9. During the lockdown there has been a boom in walking and cycling numbers, as people who usually feel too unsafe to go out other than by car, walk or cycle, because of the unpleasantness and danger in sharing roads with lines of motorised vehicles. Families with young children have been out cycling, and older people, who may be slower, are taking it up again. It is clear that in the absence of motorised traffic more vulnerable road users feel able to use the roads. This is to be encouraged and has been one of the interesting and hopeful moves to emerge from the pandemic.
10. Finally, we are facing a Climate Emergency of an extremely serious nature due to human dependence on fossil fuel burning. This threatens all of us and all of life as we know it. To date we have seen fires and floods across the globe on an unprecedented scale, and other highly disturbing unsettled weather events. Every year breaks some kind of a record for heat during at least one month of the year. At this time of writing we are experiencing a very hot and dry May which has seen summer flowers bloom early, and a some weeks without rain. It is imperative that we start to break our dependency on the private motor car, which is one of the largest contributors to carbon emissions in the UK. This is likely to mean all of us making changes to the way we live. If we cannot maintain a small and simple street closure, and adapt ourselves around it, then there is no hope that we can adapt to greater changes.

Cllr Dick Wolff

on behalf of the Green Party in Oxford City

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